

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

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February 3, 1976

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Dr. Halfdan Mahler  
Director General  
World Health Organization  
1121 Geneva 27, Switzerland

Dear Dr. Mahler,

As I understand that you will have been extremely busy with the business of the Executive Board during the last month, perhaps you may forgive me for being somewhat slow in returning this formal report of our visit last December.

The interval has given me the opportunity to reflect on the wisdom of my recommendations and to discuss them discreetly with a small number of people whose judgment and prudence I could trust.

The more I have been able to learn of WHO and the more time I have had to ponder on that limited knowledge, the more cautious I must be in making any recommendations to you at all. The moreso for some of the enclosed which may seem to you impertinent and beyond the scope of my instructions. There may be many reasons why you might discount them; and even more that you might quarrel with their particular detail. However, if you would ignore such obvious faults by transforming them into your own more informed perceptions, I believe that you might still find some substance for your own reflections, on the extent to which the existing managerial organization of WHO permits you to direct it in the efficient implementation of its mandate. I understand, of course, that certainly the more ceremonial features of that structure could not be readily altered without some political opposition that might not be worth the yield. I am also aware that the paper structure of the operation at Geneva does not reflect more than a small part of the pattern of power and responsibility that actually governs the organization. I would submit, however, that the very difficulty that one encounters in trying to understand that framework must also become, in the long run, a serious impediment to rational management.

Certainly, I do not expect these suggestions to be acted upon without the most careful re-examination and reformulation. I had thought whether a management consultant could play a useful role and decided that the very special work of the WHO made it unlikely that you could gain much benefit from commercially available expertise. However, albeit this is just a related question, the politics of WHO could probably with considerable operational benefit be ventilated by more aggressive academic studies than has been possible or encouraged in recent history. At least I have been able to find very little documentation on this question in the literature of political science and international affairs.

- 2 -

2/3/76

This is in some ways closely connected with the air of mystery that surrounds WHO's public relations in general. Of course, everyone knows that WHO does good, and that global health is among the most pressing of contemporary human problems. But try to find exactly what it is that WHO is contributing to the solution to these problems, in relation to the multitude of other efforts, and I think you will see that the outsider will face a stone-wall, at least when it comes to any kind of synoptic review that can lead to an overall picture.

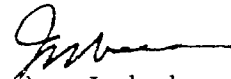
As indicated in my report, the same is true of WHO's research programs. I have to confess that 10 days was just not long enough for me to come to grips with any serious examination of the overall structure of WHO research. I do not think this can be laid entirely to obtuseness or laziness on my part; in many other organizations I would have been able to start with the necessary documents already available from which to undertake a more comprehensive examination of particular points of interest. I know that this problem is perceived by many and that the RPD is currently engaged in a new effort to obtain more and better organized information on this score. Since research occupies only a small part of WHO's overall budget, this fault may be laid to some preoccupation with other concerns, but I believe that the syndrome is a rather general one effecting most of the activities of the organization. I am also bound to believe that it is related to the structural issues that I have singled out for special comment.

Perhaps the most serious fault that can be laid to my analysis is that it reflects a brief experience, and all of that in Geneva, whereas much of the "action" is managed within the regions. I have to leave it to you the extent to which this reality undercuts the force of the principal recommendations presented here.

Believe me, I can also sympathize that these questions, even if they are entirely valid, may still rank lower than others even more pressing for priority of your concern. This then can lead to the paradox that the remediation of these managerial stresses is a matter that cannot be pursued because of the level of existing stress! But that is hardly a unique situation in human affairs, we must regret to observe.

Marguerite and I were most appreciative of the extraordinary hospitality and courtesy that was extended to us during our visit and hope that these observations can be of even the smallest service to you and to world health. I am personally particularly grateful for your exhortations to respond in complete candor and have endeavored to do so.

Yours respectfully,

  
Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr  
Enclosure